

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 3, 2021

9:01 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Roger Holland, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Shelley Hughes
Senator Peter Micciche
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 8

"An Act relating to early education programs provided by school districts; relating to school age eligibility; relating to funding for early education programs; establishing early education programs and a voluntary parent program; relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to certification of teachers; establishing a reading intervention program for public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; establishing a reading program in the Department of Education and Early Development; establishing a teacher retention working group; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

"ALASKA ACADEMIC IMPROVEMENT & MODERNIZATION ACT"

- PENDING INTRODUCTION & REFERRAL

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 8

SHORT TITLE: PRE-K/ELEM ED PROGRAMS/FUNDING; READING

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) BEGICH

01/22/21 (S) PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/21

01/22/21	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/22/21	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/15/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
02/15/21	(S)	Heard & Held
02/15/21	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
02/19/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
02/19/21	(S)	Heard & Held
02/19/21	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
02/22/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
02/22/21	(S)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
03/01/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/01/21	(S)	Heard & Held
03/01/21	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/03/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

JAMIE BURGESS, Superintendent
Nome Public Schools
Nome, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented on the effectiveness of pre-K in Nome.

SCOTT MACNAMUS, Superintendent
Alaska Gateway School District
Tok, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed the ways that SB 8 meets the goals of the Alaska Education Challenge (AEC).

DEENA BISHOP, Superintendent
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions about the impact of pre-K in her district.

VALERIE BROOKS, Ed.D., representing self
Ketchikan, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

PATRICK ANDERSON, CEO
Rural CAP
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

SHERRI BECKER, Superintendent
Southeast Island School District
Thorne Bay, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

POSIE BOGGS

Alaska Reading Coalition

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

NORM WOOTEN, Director of Advocacy

Association of Alaska School Boards

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

DIANNE ORR, Director

Teaching and Learning

Anchorage School District

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

ROZLYN WYCHE, Cofounder and President

Alaska Coalition of BIPOC Educators

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

DAVE MUSGRAVE, Ph.D., representing self

Hatcher Pass, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

LAURA NEVADA, representing self

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

TERRI WALKER, Superintendent

Northwest Arctic Borough School District

Kotzebue, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

TAMMY SMITH, representing self

Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

KIM SAUNDERS, representing self

Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

SUSAN MULLANE, representing self

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

MARGO BELLAMY, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

JEREMY O'NEIL, representing self
Valdez, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

PATRICIA CHESBRO, representing self
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[9:01:54 AM](#)

CHAIR ROGER HOLLAND called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:01 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Begich, Hughes, and Chair Holland. Senators Stevens and Micciche arrived during the course of the meeting.

SB 8-PRE-K/ELEM ED PROGRAMS/FUNDING; READING

[9:02:36 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 8 "An Act relating to early education programs provided by school districts; relating to school age eligibility; relating to funding for early education programs; establishing early education programs and a voluntary parent program; relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to certification of teachers; establishing a reading intervention program for public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; establishing a reading program in the Department of Education and Early Development; establishing a teacher retention working group; and providing for an effective date."

He stated his intent to continue to hear invited and public testimony and hold the bill in committee. He called on invited testimony.

[9:03:03 AM](#)

JAMIE BURGESS, Superintendent, Nome Public Schools, Nome, Alaska, said that before she became superintendent, she was director of federal programs and instruction and oversaw the district's pre-K grant, so she is intimately familiar with the benefits of pre-K as seen in Nome students. She supports Senator

Begich's premise that pre-K is a key part, but not the only part of comprehensive (*indisc.--noise interference*). She would share data from her school district showing the connection between high-quality pre-K program and improved student achievement. She acknowledges that the data set is small and does not fit any of the criteria for a rigorous scientific study, but the patterns are seen in her district on a consistent basis and provides anecdotal evidence of the impact of pre-K in a rural district composed primarily of children of color.

MS. BURGESS presented a brief history of prekindergarten in Nome on slide 2.

Nome Public Schools has partnered with the two existing preschool providers from 2009-2019

Two preschool providers

Nome Preschool - private non-profit organization
founded in 1970, mainly parent- driven

Head Start - administered by local tribal non-profit
organization

These providers have the capacity to serve approximately 2/3 of the average kindergarten class each year (40 out of 60)

The State of Alaska Preschool Grant allowed placement of certified teachers in the classrooms of the partner organizations

[9:05:16 AM](#)

MS. BURGESS stated that beginning in 2009, Nome received one of the state's preschool grants and began a formal partnership with the preschool providers to improve the quality of preschool programming. Each year Nome has about 20 children entering kindergarten who have not attend any preschool program. With the preschool grant, Nome placed a certified early elementary education teacher in each classroom.

MS. BURGESS said the grant originally funded up to three teachers, two at Head Start and one at Nome Preschool. Nome has had difficulty finding early elementary certified teachers and retaining them. In the latter years of the grant uncertainty around the funding of the grant program, often extending into the early summer months, made finding a highly-qualified, early elementary certified teacher in June or July almost impossible. Eventually, the district was unable to hire any teachers in the

spring of 2019 and had to decline the grant in the fall of 2019. The last year with a certified preschool teacher was the 2018-2019 school year.

MS. BURGESS presented data on slide 5 of the fall 2016 kindergarten DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Early Literacy Skills) scores. DIBELS is a nationally recognized assessment for determining if children are developing foundational literacy skills and eventually fluency and comprehension in reading. The graph shows the percentages reaching proficiency on the DIBELS for kindergarten students who attended preschool and those who did not. There is clearly a significant difference.

[9:08:29 AM](#)

MS. BURGESS showed MAP reading scores for the same cohort in second grade on slide 6. MAP is a nationally normed assessment comparing students from across the country. The MAP benchmark for grade level performance is typically around 40 percent, but Nome Elementary looks for students falling below 25 percent as candidates for reading intervention. The slide shows that children who have not attended preschool were more likely to be identified as needing to be enrolled in the district's reading intervention program.

MS. BURGESS showed the fall 2018 kindergarten Alaska Developmental Profile results on slide 7. Students are scored on the various goals. A score of 2 means consistently demonstrating the skill or behavior, 1 means sometimes demonstrating the skill or behavior, and 0 means almost or never demonstrating the skill or behavior. The graph shows the results for students who did not attend preschool, those who attended preschool not led by a certified teacher, and those who did. Only 17 percent of students assessed met at least 11 of the 13 goals, but more students who attended preschool met the goals and the largest group who met the goals was children who attended preschool led by a certified teacher.

MS. BURGESS showed the MAP data for the fall of 2018 for the same cohort on slide 8. Seventy-two percent who attended preschool scored at the 40th percentile or higher, indicating they are reading close to grade level, while only 55 percent of student who did not attend preschool met the same benchmark.

MS. BURGESS showed on slide 9 a further break out of the cohort showing who had the benefit of a certified teacher.

[9:11:11 AM](#)

MS. BURGESS said that one of the requirements of SB 8 is a funded preschool program led by a high-quality teacher. In the absence of the Nome district providing certified teachers, the preschool partners used staff of varying education backgrounds and experience. These individuals do their very best and receive some training from their organizations, but their knowledge of best practices in early education, especially early literacy, is often lacking. The most experienced Nome kindergarten teacher with 15 years of experience was asked to describe her general impression of incoming kindergarteners after Nome lost certified teachers in the preschool program. She said she had noticed a significant change with the 2019-2020 incoming kindergarteners. It was one of the lowest classes she has ever had. She had to rethink how she did her centers. Another kindergarten teacher who had transferred out of the preschool program that prior year had had most of the kids in her class in her preschool. Her class had the highest scores in all the assessments. Even before the shutdown in March 2020, Nome knew there would be gaps for the 2020-2021 class. For example, Head Start did not have enough staff and students were not getting a full year of preschool before the shutdown.

MS. BURGESS said this showed in the social emotional learning skills of students. It was necessary to work with students on how to behave in school and how to interact with one another.

[9:13:13 AM](#)

MS. BURGESS said that Nome elementary still has a long way to go to meet the goal of students reading at grade level by third grade. The school received a designation of comprehensive support in 2019, meaning it was one of the lowest performing Title I schools in the state. Nome received a state comprehensive literacy grant and has been working diligently to increase the knowledge and capacity of each of its elementary teachers to be effective in teaching children to read. The crisis of preschool does not solve all the issues, but her data shows the absence of high-quality preschool programs creates an additional hurdle teachers must work even harder to overcome. Reliable funding to create a solid, consistent preschool program is a key foundational step to move closer to the ultimate goal of all students reading at or above grade level. SB 8 in its present form is supported by the Alaska Superintendents Association and ties directly to its joint position statements on the need for universal pre-K. Senator Begich has worked closely with Alaska Superintendents Association and many other members of the education community over many months. She has concern about merging SB 42 and SB 8. She encourages the

committee to put SB 8 forward in its current form. It has the best chance of making a difference because of its well-crafted, interrelated components and would be welcomed by school district leaders. The state should put its money where its mouth is and invest intelligently in future of Alaska's children.

9:15:26 AM

SENATOR BEGICH said that people keep asking about data points, and she had compelling data points that underscore not only the importance of certified teachers, which is part of high-quality pre-K, but also the impact of that not just on the ability to read but also social/emotional issues that are emerging as a result of the pandemic. She had mentioned SB 8, but if there is a committee substitute adopted, he asked if she would agree that the committee substitute would have to have all these components. He, the commissioner of education, and the governor have talked about the three components of certified, high-quality pre-K coupled with a literacy program and the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) support, which she mentioned that her district had had to walk away from, to ensure every district has the opportunity to implement the program. He asked if she would agree that the three-part comprehensive approach is necessary in whatever bill this committee produces.

MS. BURGESS replied that one thing that is very important is to get the university to do a better job at helping teachers ready to be good reading teachers. Unfortunately, in Alaska, many teachers come from outside. Even if the state works on improving the University of Alaska teacher preparation program, the state has no control over teachers from outside. The key is to have formalized support. DEED is a perfect vehicle to do that to continue to help elementary school teachers with the ability to develop the capacity to become excellent reading teachers. The comprehensive state literacy grant was a big step forward and clearly recognized the need for that support. She agrees with Senator Begich that it is not enough to just have pre-K. It is not enough to have a good reading program. Support must be provided to districts. Rural districts have a lot of turnover, so that has to be ongoing support because there will be new teachers year after year.

9:19:14 AM

SENATOR BEGICH said the committee has discussed removing the teacher retention task force from SB 8 and SB 42 because that work has been initiated and is ongoing. He asked if she would be comfortable with that element being removed from a bill given that it is redundant now.

MS. BURGESS answered she would be. Some good work has been started and is ongoing with the teacher retention task force.

[9:20:29 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES noted that Ms. Burgess had commented on the preparation of teachers by universities. Senator Hughes has discussed with superintendents that some students coming out of universities are prepared and some aren't, and then Ms. Burgess mentioned so many teachers come from out of state. The committee heard on March 1 from Dr. [Kymyona] Burk with ExcelinEd. Dr. Burk had been involved with the pre-K and early literacy program and said a licensure requirement solved the problem in Mississippi. Because teachers had to pass a test with a certain score to receive a license, higher education in Mississippi adjusted coursework. Senator Hughes asked if Ms. Burgess would support that concept, especially if there were no immediate effective date but students getting an education degree would have a few years to get the coursework needed to pass the test. Ms. Burgess would know every teacher being hired was equipped in that area. Senator Hughes knows Ms. Burgess cannot speak on behalf of the Superintendents Association, but she asked for Ms. Burgess' gut feeling about some sort of licensure requirement.

[9:22:44 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS joined the committee.

MS. BURGESS responded that she would support additional certification exams in the area of reading for elementary teachers. However, if that is required for teachers who are currently certified, there should be financial support if it means taking additional reading courses. Districts would also want to provide additional support. She is speaking for herself, but she thinks she would generally support that concept.

SENATOR HUGHES shared that she hoped to have this conversation with the commissioner and other committee members because teachers would need the coursework to prepare. DEED perhaps could provide the course at low cost or no cost.

SENATOR BEGICH said that a section on page 13 of SB 8 deals with teacher certification. That was worked on extensively during the process and added significant language around evidence-based reading instruction and requirements during the retraining period. He read, "However, a teacher holding a preliminary teacher certificate issued under this section must complete three credits or the equivalent of coursework, training, or

testing requirements in evidence-based reading instruction approved by the board to be eligible for an endorsement in elementary education issued by the department." That would almost be what Senator Hughes is describing. He would like to talk to Dr. Burk in more detail about that. Many people worked on this language to ensure that people have the competency level to do the work and allowing them enough time to attain that.

SENATOR HUGHES replied that three credits of training is wonderful, but she would want the teachers to have a decent GPA. That can be discussed further.

9:25:54 AM

SCOTT MACNAMUS, Superintendent, Alaska Gateway School District, Tok, Alaska, said he is also a member of the executive board of the Alaska Superintendents Association and the current president of the Coalition for Education Equity. He grew up with a subsistence lifestyle in Ambler with parents who were educators. He served an overseas tour of duty and then went to the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He started teaching in 1998 and has been a superintendent for five years. He is typical of many Alaskans who share a deep love for the state and its children. He is so excited to discuss improving education in Alaska. This is what SB 8 is all about. He applauded the committee for its work on this legislation and for listening to the many educators from across the state whose expertise and work have contributed to the careful design of SB 8 over the past two sessions.

MR. MACNAMUS said that SB 8 could become one of the most significant drivers of improvement in Alaska's schools. When his district contemplates something new, it looks to its strategic plan. His board wants to know how changing something is going to further the goals of the strategic plan and whether the district can afford it.

9:28:09 AM

SENATOR MICCICHE joined the committee.

MR. MACNAMUS said that is the approach he wants to address this morning. Like his school district, the Department of Education also has a strategic plan called the Alaska Education Challenge (AEC). The AEC was developed with input from hundreds of Alaskans and approved by the state Board of Education. DEED Commissioner Johnson said that the Alaska Education Challenge was a question for all Alaskans, "How will we meet the educational challenges that we face for Alaska students in the 21st century." SB 8 directly supports the goals of the Alaska

Education Challenge: Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade. Increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs. Close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources. Prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals. Improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes.

MR. MACNAMUS said that SB 8 checks every single one of those boxes. It is based on the most current research on reading instruction in consultation with education experts and vetted through fierce and passionate argument. It is a model of how good things get done. There is a broad-based coalition of support from superintendents to teachers, unions, small and large school boards, and corporations.

9:29:39 AM

MR. MACNAMUS said SB 8 supports sustainable pre-K. The average student starting kindergarten in the U.S. has an expressive vocabulary of 2,100 to 2,200 words. In countries like Finland, which is currently ranked the number one country to be a working parent, students start their formal education with an even higher vocabulary. In his district, which is a high poverty district with a higher percentage than average of special needs students and limited English proficiency students, many of whom have not had preschool, kindergarteners start with an average vocabulary of just 500 words, which is just a fraction of what should be expected. Alaska Gateway has a grant-funded program called Gateway Ready, which is designed to get students ready for kindergarten. It is one of many grants used over the years to piecemeal the pre-K program. The difference between those who attend pre-K and those who don't is clear. With high poverty students from families where reading is not the norm, getting students ready for kindergarten is the only way to close the achievement gap. With Alaska Gateway's piecemeal approach to preschool programs entirely dependent on grants, it is difficult to keep staff. The district currently has a state literacy grant, but it can't be counted on from one year to the next. As a result, the staff turnover in those programs is high and the training given to the staff is lost.

MR. MACNAMUS said that SB 8 supports recruitment and retention of teachers. The state can't just tell schools to hire more reading teachers. It is not going to work. He has been trying to hire a reading interventionist for three years. He finally found one this year. The state must ask where these teachers are going

to come from. It is hard to hire and keep a good teacher, but even harder with these additional requirements. He is not against those additional requirements, but to do that there must be an infrastructure to better train existing teachers and attract those the state doesn't have. The state must work with the university and SB 8 does that through professional development. It will help support homegrown educators. SB 20, the reciprocity bill, can also help with that, he said.

9:33:06 AM

MR. MACNAMUS said that SB 8 provides the support of DEED that can work with the university system to develop training programs, develop in-house reading programs, train paraprofessionals to provide cost-effective program consistency, and create micro-credentialing pathways. DEED support for reading intervention programs is critical. It can be done. Years ago he wrote a grant to fund a residential summer program for middle school students that resulted in a full year's growth in reading and math in 30 days. It was expensive and intense. That was cobbled together for seven years through various grants. It made a difference. The dropout rate for that cohort was tiny compared to students who didn't attend the program. That federal funding source has long dried up. His point is the state can make a difference if people put their minds to it. SB 8 is one opportunity to do that. SB 8 is not just legislation that mandates improvement. It is a comprehensive plan based on evidence and research and provides for not only the intended outcomes in line with the AEC priority of every student reading at grade level by third grade but also a way to get there. SB 8 is way to reach one of the most important goals of the Alaska Education Challenge, to get all children to read. It has been vetted across the state, it is broadly supported, and comports with what is known about teaching and reading intervention.

9:35:46 AM

SENATOR STEVENS asked how his district tests for vocabulary and how often.

MR. MACNAMUS answered his district uses several tools. One is the Alaska Developmental Profile, DIBELS vocabulary assessments, and AIMSweb. The district can see the difference between kids who go through Head Start with the Tanana Chiefs Conference and the district preschools in some schools. The district can see the difference between kids who come to school ready and those who do not.

9:37:11 AM

SENATOR BEGICH asked if he has data similar to Nome's for students who have attended preschool or if he could give his observations about the difference it makes.

MR. MACNAMUS answered that the preschool program has never had a certified teacher. He doesn't have data for that specifically, but he has a fair bit of experience and he agrees with everything Superintendent Burgess said regarding the benefits of having a certified teacher. There is no question that it would be an improvement.

SENATOR BEGICH asked if he thought there would be a better chance of recruiting certified teachers if the bill became law with a pathway for pre-K so the process would not be to cobble a preschool program together every year.

MR. MACNAMUS answered beyond any question. It is difficult to recruit if a teacher is asked to move to his district without a guaranteed job from one year to the next. His district has been relying on aides who are trained but even the aides do not stay because the district cannot offer them employment after a grant comes to an end. Consistent and reliable pre-K programming would be important and critical.

CHAIR HOLLAND stated that Deena Bishop will provide answers about previous testimony.

[9:40:04 AM](#)

DEENA BISHOP, Superintendent, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, said she hadn't received any questions.

[9:40:24 AM](#)

At ease

[9:40:30 AM](#)

SENATOR MICCICHE said he wanted her perspective because the Anchorage School District (ASD) has had preschool programs. ASD is a diverse district with probably some fairly challenged families. He asked if she sees a difference with pre-K for those students. He is a huge supporter of pre-K. If funds were unlimited, this would be an easy decision, but funds are not unlimited. He asked her how many years she has been in Anchorage.

DR. BISHOP replied this is her fifth year in Anchorage. She was superintendent in Mat-Su for five years. They both have pre-K programs.

SENATOR MICCICHE asked her to tell him about data points for students they would like to target for improvement and preparation for K-12. He asked her to talk about her direct experience, on the difference perhaps between a child who doesn't have parental support who has not had pre-K and that same child who has had pre-K.

DR. BISHOP replied that there is a difference and a relationship among students who have had the ability to pre-learn and move on to kindergarten. The purpose of each grade level is to learn the skills needed for the next grade level. Many children won the parent lottery because those parents have the resources to engage children in a plethora of experiences and with experiences come language. Senator Micciche had referred to the diversity of Anchorage. One of the biggest roadblocks is language acquisition. People who learned another language know they need to be engulfed in it and hear it over and over and then it starts to make sense.

9:44:03 AM

DR. BISHOP said that Anchorage has lots of different layers of pre-K. For students who are developmentally delayed, state pays the Base Student Allocation times 13 for those students. They are well resourced in programs that are part of special services. Those students have an Individualized Education Program. Kids with Child Find can access preschool through title schools and Head Start. The district adds almost \$2 million to the pre-K state grant to offer pre-K. It is for families with two struggling, working parents, the working poor, so to speak. Every dollar is spent to live on. They just don't have the funds available to pay for pre-K. It is generally the upper end of lower socioeconomic students who don't have access, but they need pre-K, but not just any pre-K. She uses the term literacy bootcamp. It should be focused on learning the skills they need to be successful in kindergarten. Their teachers do a wonderful job, but if the students start far behind, it is difficult to make up.

DR. BISHOP said that Florida studies show that pre-K was most successful with English language learners. She does not believe that every child in the district needs to be in preschool. That is overkill. She believes in parent choice. Private preschools do an excellent job, but the target area is those families whose kids don't test low enough to be developmentally delayed and the families too wealthy for Head Start and not wealthy enough to afford private pre-K. The district has about 200-400 kids on the

preschool waiting list, and Anchorage services about 4,000 students per grade level.

SENATOR MICCICHE said he will submit additional questions. If he supports a bill that is going to cost x amount over six years, he wants to be able to go to constituents and demonstrate the things they care about is what he cares about and it is going to cost a few dollars and this is what the state will get out of it. He has a first grader. In her first weeks of kindergarten, the variation in what the teacher could do between the least performing and best performing students was extraordinary. He can see how that is a drag. He doesn't mean it negatively, but it holds the others back as opposed to the whole group moving further together.

9:48:11 AM

CHAIR HOLLAND said the committee will forego the fiscal notes for the day to make time for public testimony. He opened public testimony.

9:49:16 AM

VALERIE BROOKS, Ed.D., representing self, Ketchikan, Alaska, said she is a reading specialist and has been a teacher for 25 years. She is representing herself, but she is an NEA-Alaska board member and a member of the board's reading action team. She thanked Senator Begich for crafting a bill with input from stakeholders. She sees the impact of pre-K education daily as she teaches primary age students. This bill can go far in addressing school and learning readiness. SB 8 reflects the need for quality pre-K education and reading support in Alaska. A great deal of research supports the benefits of quality pre-K. One major difference between SB 42 and SB 8 is mandatory retention in SB 42 for students assessed with below grade level reading at the end of grade three. Mandatory retention is not an educationally sound determination. Her doctoral research shows that with one-on-one or small group settings with individual reading plans for intervention in grade three, the majority of students were reading proficiently at the end of grade three. DEED-supported reading program in SB 8 can provide these impacts. SB 8 is culturally responsive and includes parents in decision making. She appreciates the voluntary aspect of the pre-K program and its support for existing Head Starts and other public pre-K programs. The bill could decrease socio-economic disparities. The funding for this bill will benefit all Alaska students. She was an Air Force kid and went to pre-K in England many years ago.

9:51:55 AM

PATRICK ANDERSON, CEO, RurAL CAP, Anchorage, Alaska, said that RurAL CAP is present in over 60 communities. Its target population is those families that live with poverty. It works with partners to offer Head Start, early Head Start, and Parent as Teachers in 24 communities. This next year, as a result of reallocation of funding by DEED, RurAL CAP will be closing a number of its locations. He doesn't know yet where the closures will occur, but his understanding is that there will be a net loss of Head Start seats in Alaska. For that and many other reasons, RurAL cap is supportive of the bill's goals to increase pre-K services, especially in rural Alaska. RurAL CAP hopes that additional state-funded opportunities will replace lost Head Start seats. Poverty has numerous effects on the readiness of children for school. Children who are not learning and hearing spoken words are at a serious disadvantage, but nutrition deficiencies and Adverse Childhood Experiences also create disadvantages. Considering Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in legislation now a policy of the state. He mentioned a famous study in English in which the bottom performing 20 percent of children improved significantly with supplementation of Omega-3s. He hopes the committee will explore some of these topics later on.

9:54:13 AM

SHERRI BECKER, Superintendent, Southeast Island School District, Thorne Bay, Alaska, said that her history in education is primarily in special education. The majority of students in her career were referred to special education because of difficulty in reading. Many of those students entered kindergarten without a foundation they needed to be successful readers. Many of the kindergarten teachers did not provide high-quality reading instruction and were not able to identify gaps which prevented students from continuing to grow in literacy. SB 8 provides the opportunity for staff to be trained in best practices and evidence-based literacy instruction. This allow educators to identify students at risk and provide intervention confidently. A solid foundation of pre-K programs is desperately needed to support life-long literacy of students. Early detection, strong training in providing quality literacy instruction, and the other components of SB 8 will provide districts with the tools to improve the education they provide. SB 8 builds on previous legislation that was not passed last year. Students cannot continue to wait.

9:56:09 AM

POSIE BOGGS, Alaska Reading Coalition, Anchorage, Alaska, thanked all for working so hard and long to improve reading for students because low reading proficiency leads to adverse childhood experiences. This is an often ignored fact in education systems. She concurs with the testimony of the Nome Superintendent Burgess. Regarding Senator Hughes' question about passing a reading competency exam, the Reading Coalition endorses that. However, it will take more than a three-credit course to ensure teachers can pass such a test because teachers must have skill and practice to do so. A two-week cram course to pass such a test should not be allowed. The university undergraduate program can be redesigned in many ways if the university can find science-of-reading professors, who are hard to find. Considering the cost of SB 8, what is costly is students dropping out and those who are poorly prepared in reading. Just for the school districts represented by the committee, the cost each year is \$116 million, according to the Education Consumer Foundation. The cost is for healthcare, public safety, welfare, and education. If that doesn't give Alaska a sense of urgency to drive for a seismic change in the education system, what else will drive these changes, she asked. It is not defensible to not move SB 8.

[9:59:28 AM](#)

NORM WOOTEN, Director of Advocacy, Association of Alaska School Boards, Juneau, Alaska, said the committee has heard the research. When he was first elected to a school board in the 1980s, they spoke consistently about the need for pre-K. Year after year in Alaska there has been advocacy for universal pre-K. The research is clear that quality, early childhood education pays off in the long run. SB 8 is the opportunity to implement pre-K. Reading is the most critical determinant in the success of children and adults. Children who cannot read by the end of third grade are handicapped for their entire lives and that will likely affect their earning power throughout adulthood. DEED is the best entity to provide support to school districts. The state has to create the ability for elementary teachers to be experts in evidence-based reading instruction and then support them in their work. The state must screen early elementary students for reading proficiencies and be ready with aggressive interventions to catch them up. Districts need support for reading strategies and reading interventions. The Association of Alaska School Boards has 12 resolutions in support of the elements contained in SB 8. SB 8 has all the elements needed to provide the education students deserve. He is convinced that pre-K and research-based reading instruction interventions will be a game changer for the youngest Alaskans and provide a better

educated citizenry. The Association of Alaska School Boards strongly supports SB 8.

10:01:40 AM

DIANNE ORR, Director, Teaching and Learning, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, thanked Senator Begich for his commitment to ensuring that a strong educational foundation is in place for every Alaskan child. This bill is a nonpartisan solution that puts the needs children first. It is now settled science about how to teach reading. Unfortunately, this settled science has not made its way into all Alaskan classrooms. The state needs to bridge this gap and provide evidence-based reading instruction starting in preschool. She was a reading instructional coach and a principal of a Title I school. These experiences proved that once teachers were trained in the science of reading and implemented these instructional practices and students were provided a multitiered system of support, student achievement improved. As a member of the state task force on reading proficiency and dyslexia, the final report of March 2019 documented that with early intervention and effective reading instruction, almost all kids can learn to read proficiently by third grade. Many states have invested in teaching professional learning around the science of reading and now have more students reading at grade level by third grade. To increase reading in Alaska, there must be a supportive infrastructure. That is why SB 8 is needed. SB 8 provides standardization along with customization. An assessment system must be in place that includes universal screeners. A student who can't read proficiently by third grade is four times less likely to graduate. If the student comes from a low-income family, that student is 13 times less likely to graduate. The state pays a price for those students who do not graduate, such as with lost earnings, productivity, tax revenue, and increased governmental services costs. Making sure every Alaska student can read by third grade starts with providing access to high-quality preschool grounded in evidence-based practices.

10:05:52 AM

ROZLYN WYCHE, Cofounder and President, Alaska Coalition of BIPOC Educators, Anchorage, Alaska, said that she is a member of Mountain View Community Council. She is a paraeducator and mother of five. Her children are part of a Title I preschool program. She is working on a dual degree in elementary and special education. She went to preschool that her mother paid for, but Ms. Wyche could not afford to pay preschool programs on her own. Her children have gained so much with Anchorage School District preschool. She urged the committee to pass SB 8.

10:09:00 AM

DAVE MUSGRAVE, Ph.D., representing self, Hatcher Pass, Alaska, thanked all for the work on the bill. SB 8 will increase educational outcomes by creating pre-K programs that have been shown to work throughout Alaska and the nation. Many cannot afford preschool. His son attended pre-K. He had cognitive disabilities and had an Individualized Education Program throughout school; he graduated from a career tech high school in the Mat-Su and was able to obtain an Alaska performance scholarship with the University of Alaska. Pre-K is especially important for families in rural Alaska or those in disadvantaged neighborhoods in urban and suburban areas. Early education must be part of the curriculum for Alaska students. He also supports the reading program in the bill.

10:10:29 AM

LAURA NEVADA, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, said she works with the Anchorage School District and worked 25 years in education. Every child deserves the fundamental right to learn to read. For this to be accomplished the state must provide children with evidence-based reading instruction starting in preschool. This is why Alaska needs SB 8. Reading is not a natural process. To crack the code of written language, science say evidence-based reading instruction must be used, teachers must have professional development and a multitiered system of support must be provided, which includes universal screening, interventions, and progress monitoring. This bill mandates that children be provided explicit instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension strategy. Reading proficiency depends on expert and integrated teaching of these skills. There is a need for thoroughness and depth of teacher training. Students deserve mastery of evidence-based reading instruction, not familiarity of best practices. All children deserve the right to learn to read. Passing SB 8 is essential to Alaska's future.

10:13:10 AM

TERRI WALKER, Superintendent, Northwest Arctic Borough School District, Kotzebue, Alaska, said she is Inupiat and a graduate of one of the villages in Northwest Arctic. She was raised by her grandfather and great-grandmother. Her great-grandmother did not speak English well and never attended any type of schooling. Her grandfather went to school up to third grade. Her mother as a graduate of Mt. Edgecumbe was the first generation to graduate high school. Ms. Walker says all this because reading was not always a primary activity in her household as few families were

lucky enough to have books in their homes. The Inupiat are proud of their culture, values, and traditions. Reading still needs to become routine in family activities. In her region, the district is the sole provider of pre-K. There are no daycares, Head Starts, or any other resources for young children. Children need exposure to a classroom setting before entering kindergarten. Having a pre-K program promotes social skills to practice being around others besides family members. It promotes the social well-being of children and builds fine motors skills needed for kindergarten. This year, COVID has resulted in a loss of instruction. Through the support of DEED, the district will need to adjust strategies to meet students where they are at. The district must plan a new timeline for learning. Students will catch up over time. Retention will only create stigma for many students. Built-in intervention strategies is the key to helping students to develop the skills to put them grade level. Today students must learn to carry on the traditions of their ancestors and also learn to read in order to be successful and independent.

[10:16:12 AM](#)

TAMMY SMITH, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, said that she is representing herself, but she is an NEA director. She has been an elementary teacher. Now she is a special ed teacher. She has taught every aspect of reading. She asks for support of SB 8. Even as a young teacher she saw the effect of not having a comprehensive reading programs in schools. This varies across schools and across districts. When she first came to Alaska, she was surprised to discover the lack of preschool in Alaska. She came from Minnesota, where it was a standard part of education. Preschools are an integral part of education. Children in preschool have an advantage over those who have not attended. She asked the committee to look at a 2010 Children's Defense Fund study about the advantages of preschool, including economic advantages. Ben Bernanke also did a report in 2012 on the economic value of preschool.

[10:20:00 AM](#)

KIM SAUNDERS, representing self, Kodiak, Alaska, said she works in early childhood education for the Kodiak Island Borough School District, but she is representing herself. She wants to reinforce the importance of early childhood programs. The key component for early literacy success in schools and strong reading outcomes is rooted in language, such as how many words are spoken to children and how many books are read. The links between literacy outcomes and poverty are closely aligned. Whether someone went to preschool affects income level. Alaska

families are struggling. The state mitigates the impacts of trauma and poverty on young children by ensuring they have high-quality, early childhood experiences, tons of language exposure, and good, solid phonemic awareness. SB 8 is about more than reading. It is about advocating for access for students who are already behind when they walk through the door to kindergarten. It is about equity and ensuring all children have a fighting chance to learn to read and graduate. The bill can't fix poverty, but it can help children who need to climb over barriers that poverty creates.

10:22:31 AM

SUSAN MULLANE, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, said that she is a retired Anchorage teacher. She taught special education at Mountain View. She loved Superintendent Walker's testimony. It spoke to her. From her experience working in high-poverty schools, pre-K makes a difference. It makes her breathless to think of children not having access to pre-K. It is a matter of equity. It is a matter of reducing poverty. It is a matter of future employment and executive functioning. She asked why the state continues to have this discussion because it is so important. She is consultant now and has been working in Appalachia for five years. Now she is looking at indigenous communities in the lower 48 with an 18 percent literacy rate. She is frustrated that universal pre-K is not a national mandate. According to Harvard University, children who attend pre-K are 50 percent less likely to need special education, have lower rates of teen pregnancy, decreased delinquency, and higher rates of employment. If Republicans who gripe about handouts are serious about reducing welfare, then the state should get serious about what other countries do, like Finland and Singapore, with universal pre-K. Every dollar in pre-K investment returns seven nationally. The state should be equitable to all its citizens.

10:26:05 AM

MARGO BELLAMY, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, said she is a retired educator and advocate for all Alaska children. She serves families and children in several capacities. She is on the Anchorage School District school board, board of directors for the Alaska Children's Trust, and the board of directors for the Alaska Association of School Boards. Literacy is a fundamental human right. Every child deserves to have high-quality, evidence-based learning opportunity with highly trained teachers who prepare children to enter first grade ready to learn and to read by third grade. This will ensure equity, close opportunity gaps, increase graduation rates, and most

importantly, alter the trajectory of success in school and in life for children. She encouraged the committee to invest in children by passing SB 8 as a primary infrastructure to support successful outcomes for children and youth from birth to school age and young adulthood. Universal pre-K is a critical component in the learning continuum. She realizes the investment comes at great cost but these upfront investments will save money down the line. Alaska's children cannot wait. The inequities are even greater because of COVID. She asked the committee to close the equity gaps and invest in pre-K and reading interventions now.

10:28:42 AM

JEREMY O'NEIL, representing self, Valdez, Alaska, said he works in hospital administration. As he approaches the middle part of his career, he will be a zealous advocate for early childhood education. As an employer who needs an educated workforce, the state must move the dial. He has gained an appreciation for population health and what happens in the early years of a child. As a metaphor, if people are trying to get a rocket out of the atmosphere, it is the energy in the first minutes that propels that rocket on its path. If the fuel and energy are not there in the first impactful minutes, the rocket doesn't get to its destination. Science bears out that children develop at a rapid pace. He hears concerns about money. For a long time, Alaska's per capita spending on education has been remarkable when compared to other locations. It should be balanced by an investment in early years so that kids can achieve their greater potential.

10:31:13 AM

PATRICIA CHESBRO, representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, said she is a retired educator who has been a principal, teacher, and superintendent and spent 10 years at the university level. She thanked those who collaborated on this bill. Early childhood education will help to level the playing field for those children who do not have the same skills and advantages as other children. The teachers coming out of teacher education now may be better prepared because the accreditation processes are rigorous and teacher programs must have excellent reading programs to pass accreditation, but any kind of teaching is an ongoing learning experience. She likes the part of the bill that speaks about culturally responsive teaching and interventions. Alaska has wonderful diversity. One size doesn't fit all. The state should consider the expansion of early childhood program. If there is not enough money to put into early childhood, the state would be better off to put the money into early childhood education and cut 12th grade. The reality is that the earlier

people are helped, the more successful they will be later. In her experience seniors in high school are ready to leave anyway.

[10:33:39 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND announced that he will keep public testimony open.

CHAIR HOLLAND held SB 8 in committee.

[10:33:55 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Holland adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 10:33 a.m.